DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 884 EC 113 485

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TITLE	Why Young People Become Antisocial. Science Reports.
INSTITUTION	National Inst. of Mental Health (DHEW), Rockville, Md.
REPORT NO	DHEW-ADM-78-642
PUB DATE	78
CONTRACT	278-77-0033(ST)
NOTE	13p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 (Stock No. 017-024-00795-1)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Biological Influences; *Delinquency; *Delinquency Causes; *Delinquency Prevention; Discipline; Emotionally Disturbed; Etiology; Family Influence; Parent Influence; Predictor Variables; *Socially Deviant Behavior

ABSTRACT

Based upon a review of the literature, the report examines some of the causes of antisocial behavior among youths. Aspects covered include the adult prognosis for antisocial children, childhood predictors of adult delinquency, the etiology of antisocial behavior in both children and adults, the effects of parental discipline and of separation from the family, delinquency prevention, and evidence of biological factors. (DLS)

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ED166884

Science Reports

National Institute of Mental Health

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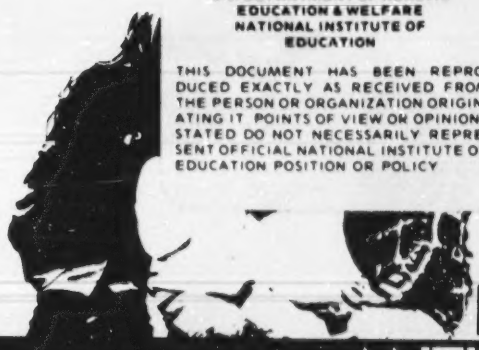

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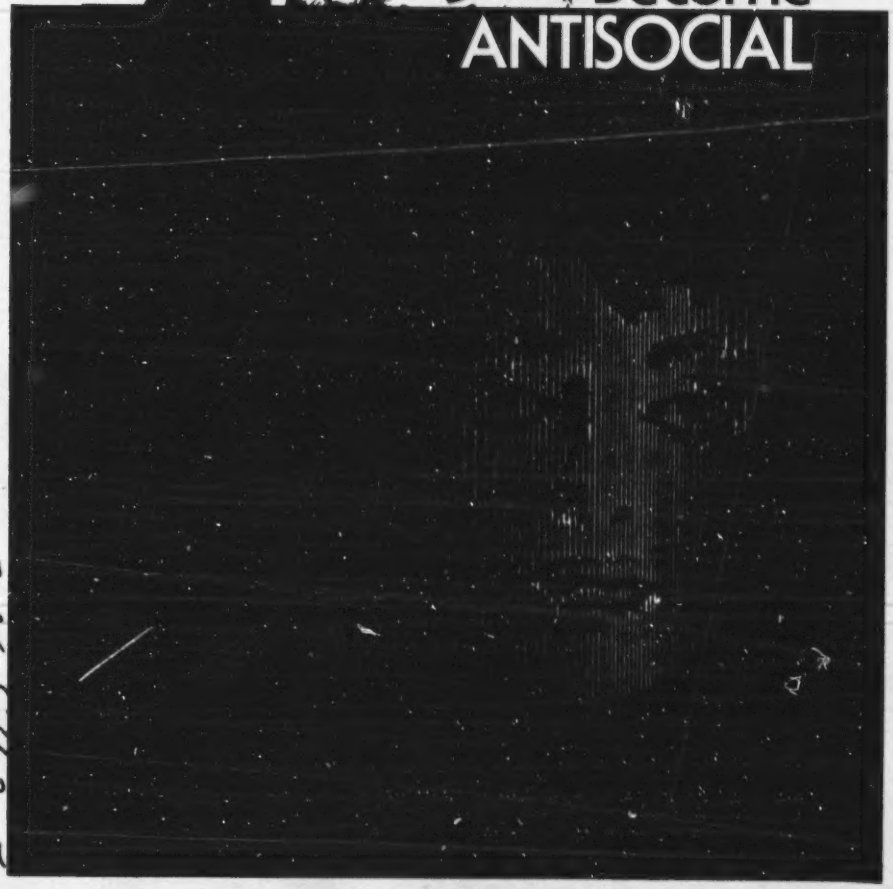

EC113485

This publication was prepared under
contract number 278-77-0033 (ST)
from the National Institute of Mental Health.

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Why Young People Become Antisocial

by Herbert Yahraes

For no apparent reason, a youth grabs an 85-year-old woman in front of her doorstep and chokes her to death. A 15-year-old boy steals a neighbor's car and is picked up 3 weeks later, hundreds of miles away, because he had parked on the wrong side of the street. A middle-aged woman is jumped by a gang of teenage girls—avid for money, of which she has none—and winds up in the hospital.

Such items dot the Nation's newspapers daily, and hundreds of thousands of similar cases are believed to go unreported every year. In 1975, close to 2 million young people under 18—about 20 percent of them girls—were arrested for offenses ranging from murder to vagrancy, and including burglary, larceny, vandalism, arson, and assault. Of all people arrested, 45 percent are under 18. During 1965-1974, according to the National Center for Juvenile Justice, the delinquency rate rose by almost 59 percent.

What has science to tell us about why kids go wrong?

Two of the most comprehensive studies of the roots of violent and other antisocial behavior in children and of antisocial personality in adults — that is, an ingrained attitude of disdain for both law and people — have been conducted by Lee N. Robins, research professor of sociology in psychiatry, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis.

In the first study, more than 500 patients who were seen at a St. Louis child guidance clinic in the 1920s were followed into their forties. A group of 100 matched controls was used. In the other study, more than 200 normal, young black males were followed into their thirties. Then, some

years later, Robins and her associates also examined the school and juvenile police records of many of the original subjects' children who were over 18.

The findings of this research, confirmed by other investigators, have posed and answered a number of major questions:

How Early Does Antisocial Personality in Adulthood Get Its Start?

Robins answers that, in childhood, "The people we have studied have been mostly lower class . . . and have had a lifetime of exposure to hardship . . . . If they did not respond with psychopathic symptoms when exposed to such an environment in childhood, they did not begin to do so as adults." Antisocial personality "apparently *cannot* begin in adulthood." In fact, unless there had been marked antisocial behavior before 18, "a diagnosis of adult antisocial personality was never made."

Robins emphasizes that onset was usually early in childhood—particularly among boys. "Most boys began having obvious difficulties as soon as they began attending school. The first signs were truancy, failure to perform well academically despite adequate IQs, stealing, and disciplinary problems in the classrooms." Another indicator was poor relationships with classmates. For a few boys and most of the few girls who became antisocial as adults, such behavior did not emerge clearly until early adolescence, usually at ages 12 to 14.

A typical antisocial child first drew attention because of difficulties during the early school years. How many had already shown serious problems in the home and neighborhood is not known, but "there are many anecdotal accounts of problems dating from infancy." Robins continues: "The fact that we do not know whether onset is really at birth is a serious lack in trying to understand the etiology. If it is truly a disorder with whch one is born, the social environment would have to be seen as at most a modifying, rather than an instigating, factor."

The role of heredity in criminal and delinquent behavior has been studied to some extent by others, with no clear outcome. In animals, a strong genetic element making for *aggressive* behavior has been proved.

How Do Antisocial Children Turn Out?

Among children referred to the child guidance clinic because of antisocial behavior, one-fourth turned out to be antisocial adults, one-twelfth were alcoholics or drug addicts, and one-ninth were psychotic. Only 16 percent recovered by the age of 18 and had no further psychiatric problems by the

age of 40. Reports Robins: "This was in marked contrast both to children referred to the clinic for reasons other than antisocial behavior, who were more often well and rarely sociopathic as adults, and to a comparison group of normal school children, 60 percent of whom were well and only 2 percent sociopathic."

The antisocial child who develops into an antisocial adult is not carefree, as popularly believed, but "liable to suffer internal misery." More significant from society's view, "he also contributes importantly to most of our major social problems." It is from antisocial children that "a very high proportion of the prisoner population comes as do many of our vagrants, our skid row inhabitants, those drug addicts who resort to crime to support their habits, and even substantial proportions of those psychotic adults who require restraint because of their aggressive and combative behavior . . . . Also from this group come many of the parents whose children end on welfare rolls, as wards of the State, or as adopted children, because the parents simply do not provide sufficient financial or affectional care for them. These neglected, impoverished, or adopted offspring themselves have a very high risk of childhood antisocial behavior disorders . . . . Thus the high frequency of antisocial disorders in the child population is preserved from one generation to

As Robins emphasizes, these findings have impressive implications for public policy. "They suggest that if one could interrupt the antisocial patterns so readily discernible by children's parents, teachers, and peers, one might greatly reduce the scope of the world's social problems."

What Childhood Symptoms Predict Adult Delinquency?

No one symptom marked every person who became delinquent as an adult, but some symptoms were very common. In more than half of the cases, these included "theft, incorrigibility, running away from home, truancy, associating with other delinquent children, staying out past the hour allowed, discipline problems in school, and school retardation." Among symptoms that were less common but occurred significantly more often than in controls were fighting, recklessness, slovenliness, enuresis, lying for no apparent gain, failure to show love, and an inability or unwillingness to show guilt over disturbing behavior.

None of these behaviors was an infallible predictor of antisocial personality, known also as sociopathy or psychopathy. In other words, the behaviors were found also in some of the children who did not become antisocial adults. "Indeed," Robins reports, "less than half of even the most highly anti-

social children" were diagnosed sociopathic when followed up years later; virtually none of these adults, however, was psychiatrically healthy. The *number* of symptoms was a considerably better predictor than any particular symptom or combination of symptoms. The more antisocial symptoms—such as lying, stealing, truancy—a child showed, the more likely he was to become an antisocial adult.

What Light Does This Research Shed on the Basic Causes of Antisocial Behavior?

In the case of an antisocial *adult*, Robins answers, it is extremely difficult to separate those aspects of the environment that may affect behavior from those aspects that are affected by the adult himself:

> The sociopath lives in a depressed neighborhood because his early behavior has kept him from completing school and his current behavior patterns make it very hard for him to hold a job or to pay his rent even when he has the money. He is divorced or separated because he has been nonsupporting, abusive to his spouse, and unfaithful. He is isolated from family members because he has long since shown them a lack of interest and has failed to provide them with his current address.

Possible causes for antisocial behavior are also difficult to tease apart. However, drawing on the work of other investigators as well as on her own, Robins in 1975 examined the three factors of sex, race, and parental behavior and found that each had an influence.

Among antisocial children, she reports, boys outnumber girls four to one or better. "Furthermore, girls who do have behavior problems tend to come from families that are worse than the boys', suggesting that girls may have a higher threshold of vulnerability to genetic and/or environmental factors . . . or that girls experience more parental control than boys even in relatively disrupted families." Whether the proportion of antisocial girls has increased in recent years, as a kind of corollary of the movement toward sexual equality, is not yet clear.

As for the racial factor, Robins notes that black children, compared with white, have higher rates of school dropout and of juvenile delinquency and, when referred to child guidance clinics, are more often seen for conduct disorders and less often for neuroses. "However," she points out, "racial discrimination as reflected in poorer quality of education, police prejudice, or psychiatrists' stereotypes might explain some or all of these differences."

A 1968 study of black and white children in the South, cited by Robins, did find that black school boys reported more antisocial behavior than whites "suggesting that biased report-

ing is not the whole story." And a 1974 study of English school children found that both parents and teachers of blacks and whites reported a higher rate of antisocial behavior among the former. It seems likely that these differences, too, are rooted in the different social climates usually encountered by members of the two races.

As might be expected, parents had an influential role. Whether their role was genetic in nature, or environmental, or both, antisocial parents produced a significantly greater proportion of delinquent youngsters. Among white males who were 17 by 1959, the delinquency rate for those having an antisocial parent was 28 percent; for the others, 13 percent. Similarly, among black males who were 17 by 1973, the delinquency rate was 43 percent if either parent was antisocial; otherwise, zero. Among black females, 24 percent of those whose fathers had been arrested at least once were delinquent, but none of those whose fathers had not been arrested were delinquent.

However, the relationship between parental behavior and the diagnosis of antisocial personality in the offspring as an *adult* (after 18) was different from the one just reported. Robins refers to people who were not antisocial as "conforming." Among both white and black children who were highly antisocial, the existence of conforming parents did not reduce the risk that these children would develop into antisocial adults.

Likewise, when children were very conforming, the existence of extremely deviant parents did not increase that risk.

The effect of parents in either increasing the risk by being deviant themselves or in decreasing it by being conforming was clearest among children in the middle range of antisocial behavior.

Perhaps surprisingly, Robins finds no reason to indict the broken home as a major factor in the development of antisocial personality.

> Our data suggest that the broken home is in fact an unimportant variable that is correlated with outcome only because antisocial parents usually separate. The child's experiencing the break itself does not seem to be the critical factor. Death of parents without problems led to no increased risk of antisocial personality, nor did we find that children's being early separated from an antisocial parent reduced the risk. Since amount of exposure to the parent seemed to have little effect, either negatively or positively, perhaps we should look to genetic factors, perinatal factors, and very early influences rather than to the experience of growing up in the parents' household as the crucial factors.

Nor, to the investigator's surprise, did low social class add much to the ability to predict antisocial personality, once the parents' and child's own behaviors were taken into account.

Similarly, Robins found no support for another popular theory, one engrained in folk wisdom, that a child's undoing can often be traced to bad companions. This explanation "must be treated with great caution," she reports, because the bad companions, instead of having led the child astray, may have been selected by him—after his problem behavior began—precisely because of a similarity of interests. "Whether children engaged in antisocial acts independently or in gangs," she notes, "they had approximately the same risk of antisocial behavior later on. Similarly, we found no effect of the neighborhood delinquency rate on the chances that the black school boys we studied would develop delinquency."

Research by Robins and her associates suggests that "at best, peer group pressure or imitation may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition to explain delinquency." They add that nondelinquent parents "*apparently were able to innoculate their children against enticement into delinquent activities even in the high delinquency areas to which housing segregation confined most blacks*" (italics supplied).

How Does the Type of Parental Discipline Affect Outcome?

When parents used discipline that Robins calls *adequate* and that also has been described as *love-oriented*, only 9 percent of the boys referred to child guidance clinics turned out as adults with a sociopathic, or antisocial, personality. Precisely the same outcome occurred when parental discipline was too strict or, in the words of some other investigators, *punitive*.

Of the children whose parents were *too lenient*, or who exerted no discipline because they were uninterested in the child, the rate of antisocial personality as adults was about 30 percent.

Those results, Robins points out, confirm the earlier finding by William and Joan McCord that *both* love-oriented and punitive discipline "militate against convictions and incarceration, while excessive leniency, inconsistent discipline, and disinterest are associated with records of convictions." Moreover, "when supervision during the teenage period was described as adequate, only 9 percent were later diagnosed sociopathic personality. . . ." This rate almost doubled among children who were sometimes supervised and sometimes not. And it more than tripled when they were supervised little, if at all.

Can Delinquency Be Prevented?

The findings reported above are strong evidence that some types of discipline and parental attitudes are far more effective than others in forestalling antisocial behavior.

Some additional light on the question is provided in a recent analysis by Robins and an associate, Eric Wish, of the development of deviance in Robins' black male subjects. Among other things, the investigators hoped to learn—by studying the sequences of deviant behaviors in these children—if certain behaviors manifested quite early could be used to predict other antisocial behaviors later on. The findings included: Absence from school in the earliest years was linked both to dropping out of school in later years and to leaving home; drinking alcohol before the age of 15 was also linked to leaving home.

"If there is a practical message in our efforts," these investigators report, "it is that centering efforts on preventing truancy in the first and second grade and drinking before 15 is likely to have the greatest payoff at least cost."

What Is The Effect of Separation From the Family?

A number of other investigators have added to our understanding of the roots of antisocial behavior. For instance, a noted English child psychiatrist, Michael Rutter, concludes that the separation of a child from his family does have "some association" with the later development of antisocial behavior. However, this is caused not by the separation itself but by "the family discord which precedes and accompanies it." The discord need not be active; it may simply be marked by lack of affection. The effects are the same. However, "a good relationship with one parent can go some way toward mitigating the harmful effect of a quarrelsome unhappy home."

In the case of transient separations, lasting at least 4 consecutive weeks, Rutter found that, when the separation was from one parent only, there was no rise in antisocial behavior. The contrary was true when the child was separated from *both* parents. However, this finding held "*only* in homes where there was a very poor marriage relationship. . . ." Where the marriage had been rated "fair" or "good," the child's separation from the parents did not affect the rate of antisocial activity.

On the basis of his own as well as of a number of other studies on permanent separations, Rutter concludes that, over all, "children from a broken home have an increased risk of delinquency." But the cause of the breakup is important. The psychiatrist cites findings from three studies that "the delinquency rates are nearly *double* for boys whose

parents had divorced or separated. . . but for boys who had lost a parent by death the delinquency rate was only slightly (and nonsignificantly) raised." In permanent as well as in transient separations, the link between the separation and antisocial behavior seems to be not the separation itself but the discord and disharmony leading to it.

Rutter carried his investigation further by studying children who had been separated from their parents because of family discord or deviance and found themselves in new family situations. The new situation was still very poor for a number of these children; for others it was fair or, for a few, even good. For children whose new family situations were very poor, the rate of antisocial disorder was double.

Rutter poses a major question: "*Why* and *how* does family discord interact with a child's temperamental characteristics to produce antisocial behavior?" He suggests several possible mechanisms. First, parents of delinquents may differ in the way they supervise and discipline their children. Parental discord may be important only to the extent that it is "associated with erratic and deviant methods of bringing up children." Second, laboratory studies have shown that children, after watching someone behaving aggressively or deviantly, tend to go and do likewise. Perhaps, then, parental discord is linked to an antisocial outcome in the child simply because it gives him a model of hostility and antisocial behavior to copy. Finally, says Rutter, perhaps "the child learns social behavior through having a warm, stable relationship with his parents," and this relationship "provides a means of learning how to get on with other people. . . ." In this case, the basis of antisocial behavior might be "difficulties in interpersonal relationships."

Is There Evidence of Biological Factors?

In addition to social and cultural determinants of violence and other antisocial behavior, a number of investigators suggest that young people prone to violent behavior may differ from normal young people in the activity of their hormones and neurotransmitters.

One of the proponents of this view, psychiatrist Derek Miller of the University of Michigan Medical School, theorizes that inappropriate hormonal responses to stress are produced in some violent youths. He supports this hypothesis with observations that these individuals tend to think of people as things instead of as human beings and, in consequence, do not appear to get excited when acting violently. Although this attitude does not always lead to violence, Miller believes that it does if the person is genetically vulnerable to it and has had relevant nurturing experience, i.e., parents who frequently use physical force without explanation.

Consistent with Miller's theory are data compiled by University of Virginia School of Medicine psychiatrist Ake Mattsson. In an attempt to locate biological abnormalities in youngsters prone to violence, he finds that the tendency of delinquent boys to have lower cortisol excretion than other boys helps to explain their low level of excitement. Mattsson is quick to point out, however, that almost all of the delinquent boys had very disruptive early family lives.

Strong evidence that delinquent boys show other physiological differences has been obtained by psychiatrist Peter H. Wolff (of the Children's Hospital Medical Center, Boston) and his associates. In one project, for example, Wolff was studying a condition called the choreiform twitch, a slight motor instability that is difficult to detect except by neurological examination. Wolff calls it "a kind of noise in the central nervous system." It can occur almost anywhere. When a youngster is reading, for example, his eyes will be focusing on one part of the page when the extraocular muscles may give a sudden twitch and shift the focus elsewhere for an instant. Boys whose delinquency has brought them into trouble with the law, Wolff finds, have a much higher incidence of choreiform twitch at an age when most other boys have outgrown it.

Wolff and his fellow investigators, beginning then to look more closely at antisocial youngsters, administered the Lincoln-Oseretski test of motor maturation to 15 delinquent boys between 14½ and 15½ years old. (This test measures a wide range of neuromuscular skills, such as jumping, crouching, balancing, sorting matchsticks, and picking up coins.) All 15 delinquents turned out to be in the *lowest 5 percent* of all boys their age. "A rather startling finding," Wolff comments. In contrast, all but one of the controls, who were normal youngsters of the same age as the delinquents, ranked in the *highest 30 percent.* The IQs of all the boys in both groups were normal or higher.

The investigators also administered the test to 15 boys being treated for learning disorders. These boys, too, had IQs that were normal or above. This time the finding was also a surprise: All but one of the boys with learning disability placed just the same as the delinquents—in the lowest 5 percent of the population.

Another study, using different tests with groups of 11-year-old delinquents and normals, also found differences in neuropsychological functioning.

On the basis of these and other studies, the investigators suggest that "children with delayed or disturbed neuromuscular development are more likely to be identified as delinquents when they grow up in a lower-class context and to be identified as children with learning disabilities when they come from a middle-class environment."

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